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SUBJECT: SADC'S ROLE IN BIOTECHNOLOGY AND BIOSAFETY IN THE
SOUTHERN AFRICAN REGION

REFS: A) Pretoria 1256; (B) 04 Gaborone 2069; (C) 04

Gaborone 1937; (D) 04 Gaborone 1318 (NOTAL)

Summary

1. Biotechnology can play a key role in economic and social development in the Southern African region. Agricultural technologies, including genetic modification, have the potential to increase food production over the next 50 years and help fight regional hunger. Progress is being made in some Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. However, SADC itself is only slowly addressing the issue of biotechnology, preferring to leave biotechnology policy up to individual states. Until SADC is ready to engage on biotechnology in a more meaningful manner, we need to advance USG biotechnology interests through bilateral interventions. End summary.

SADC Institutional Arrangements

2. In 2003, a Southern African Development Community (SADC) Advisory Committee on Biotechnology (SACB) was created to advise the SADC Council of Ministers on emerging technologies. SACB was established as an independent body composed of experienced specialists, including molecular biologists, biotechnologists, biochemists, plant breeders, animal breeders, veterinarians, environmental and trade experts, health experts and members of the civil/consumer society from the SADC region. It is housed in the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Directorate at the SADC Secretariat in Gaborone. Experts appointed to this

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Committee serve in their personal capacity; the views expressed are not binding on SADC and member states unless appropriate SADC authorities endorse them.

3. The first set of guidelines on genetically modified organisms and biotechnology was approved in August 2003 at the Integrated Committee of Ministers meeting in Dar-es-Salaam. Recently, SACB has developed a draft SADC Framework on the Safe Handling and Transboundary Movement of Genetically Modified Organisms. The Framework details the processes that must be followed, including informed agreements, notifications, information required, packaging, identification and labeling for import and export of genetically modified organism products.

4. The SADC Secretariat plans to appoint a SADC Biotechnology and Biosafety Focal Point, who will be responsible for coordinating and overseeing SADC's regional activities in biotechnology and biosafety, including establishing and managing a clearing-house mechanism, resource mobilization and utilization, and capacity building. National focal points under the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety will serve as focal points in member states under the framework. (Note: This appointment has not yet been made.)

Status of Biosafety in SADC Member States

5. The acceptance of biotechnology is slowly gaining momentum in some SADC member states as countries realize the potential it offers for sustainable food production that will help combat famine and poverty. South Africa has introduced genetically modified crops to help feed its people, leading SADC countries in acreage of genetically engineered crops such as maize and soybeans (which, together with genetically modified cotton, totaled between 700,000 and 1 million hectares in 2004). A number of universities and institutions in South Africa are involved in research, as is the National Agricultural Research Center.

6. Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe have legally binding biosafety frameworks in place already, while Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mozambique, Swaziland,

Tanzania and Zambia are working on draft legislation. Botswana is in the process of finalizing a national framework on biosafety (Refs C & D), which will include policies as well as legal, administrative and technical instruments to ensure safety for the environment and human health. USAID/RCSA is working with the Malawian government to produce a biosafety protocol.

Regional Initiatives

17. There are a number of bodies and institutions in the Southern African region that are working on public awareness and dissemination of biosafety information in most member states. AfricaBio is a non-governmental, non-political and non-profit biotechnology organization based in South Africa that advocates for stakeholders in the research and development, production, processing and consuming sectors. The bulk of its funding has been from Monsanto and other private sector companies. (Note: USAID has provided funding for training and capacity building activities.)

18. The United Nations Environment Program Global Environment Fund began a global project on development of national biosafety frameworks in 2001. The SADC countries participating are Mozambique, Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Malawi. The project uses a country-driven process to set up biosafety frameworks, and promotes regional and sub-regional exchange of experiences on issues relevant to national biosafety frameworks.

19. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) Steering Committee on Science and Technology resolved in July 2004 that its Secretariat and the African Union (AU) would establish a high-level panel of experts to prepare a comprehensive African strategy and common position on biotechnology. NEPAD's South Africa-based Science and Technology Advisor, Dr. John Mugabe, subsequently established a NEPAD biotechnology advisory panel for African policymakers and staffed the NEPAD Science and Technology Unit with a Biosciences Policy Advisor, Professor Aggrey Ambali.

10. In July 2004, Mozambique hosted an International Conference on Hunger, Food Aid and Genetically Modified Organisms to strengthen the understanding of genetically modified food aid and hunger by sharing information and starting a real dialogue among the various stakeholders. Consumer organizations, NGOs and government policy-makers participated in the conference.

U.S. Government Assistance

11. The U.S. sponsored a biotechnology fact-finding mission for SADC member states in 2003 as well as a trip specifically for Zambia in 2002. USAID's Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project also funds the South Africa-based Southern African Regional Biosafety Program, which has seven target countries -- Mauritius, Mozambique, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The project organizes workshops and training courses on innovation biotechnology, risk assessment and biosafety research. In November 2004, USAID and State/EB cosponsored a seminar -- organized by AfricaBio -- on food aid and biotechnology for representatives of several Southern African countries.

12. A significant amount of work has been accomplished on a bilateral basis in the SADC region. Embassy Pretoria has conducted an active campaign in support of biotechnology, including study tours, speakers, small research grants by USAID for biotechnology projects, and hosting an Embassy Science Fellow with biotechnology regulatory experience (who also traveled to Botswana to advise Botswana's National Biosafety Committee). In October 2004, Congressman Steve King, the Department of State and USDA/FAS sponsored a study tour of Washington, DC and Iowa for three biotechnology experts who are leading the Government of Botswana's efforts to establish a national biosafety policy (Ref C).

Resistance and Barriers

13. Despite the benefits biotechnology can bring, SADC member states are concerned that the use of genetically modified organisms carries environmental risks, including cross-pollination of genetically modified and non-genetically modified crops, herbicide tolerance and insect-resistance, elimination of non-target species of ecological importance, and uptake of genetic inserts by micro-organisms. Other matters that generally remain unresolved include implementing national biosafety regulations, building capacity to effectively monitor and enforce biosafety regulations, reaching agreement on the labeling of products, ensuring intellectual property rights, and negotiating trade agreements. The region also lacks

infrastructure such as laboratories and research stations to investigate and monitor genetically modified organism products.

14. The importation of genetically modified food aid has been a growing controversy in southern Africa since 2000 when Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe refused to accept genetically modified food aid offered by the U.S. and the World Food Program (WFP) -- despite being faced with critical food shortages. In 2004, the Angolan Government demanded that imported genetically modified grain be milled before being distributed, claiming this would protect the diversity of its plant genes. Earlier this year, press reports indicated that the Angolan Cabinet had decided to ban the import of all genetically modified organisms, with the exception of milled grain imported as food aid. Even in South Africa, the region's leading grower of genetically modified crops, local conditions for the approval and use of agricultural biotechnology and genetically modified organisms may be worsening (Ref A).

15. In 2004, biotech discussions with high-level Government of Botswana officials revealed significant political opposition to genetically modified agricultural products, despite strong support of biotechnology by President Festus Mogae (Ref D). Post's subsequent biotechnology outreach activities (para 11) may have begun to turn the tide, at least within the technical cadre.

16. The SADC Guidelines on Genetically Modified Organisms, Biotechnology and Biosafety of 2003, state that food aid consignments involving grain or any propagative plant material that may contain genetically modified organisms should be milled or sterilized prior to distribution. This policy has been reiterated in the draft SADC framework on the safe handling and transboundary movement of genetically modified organisms.

17. Public awareness in the region is very low. Member states see challenges in engaging the public created by the costs of disseminating information, traditional farming systems, traditional social and cultural factors, commercial competition and confidentiality issues, and external influences advocating against biotechnology.

Comment: Challenges Face the Region

18. Although biotechnology is a science, it has migrated into the political, ethical and public perception arenas in Southern Africa. There is a need to build capacity within SADC member states to make science-based decisions regarding the technology and provide accurate information to the public. SADC recognizes that biotechnology can dramatically improve food security in the region. However, in spite of USG and other assistance, it is only slowly addressing the issue (witness the delay in appointing a SADC Biotechnology and Biosafety Focal Point), preferring to leave it up to individual states to safeguard the interests of consumers, producers, exporters and other relevant stakeholders in Southern Africa. Until SADC is ready to engage on biotechnology in a more meaningful manner, we need to advance USG biotechnology interests through bilateral interventions.

HUGGINS